PRAYING THROUGH OUR LIFETRAPS

A Psycho-Spiritual Path to Freedom

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Resurrection Press
An Imprint of
CATHOLIC BOOK PUBLISHING CORP.
Totowa • New Jersey

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Preface

ON September 11, 2001, just as I was beginning to write this book, at a little less than a mile away from my desk, the World Trade Center attacks interrupted the course of our history and generated unprecedented levels of fear and anxiety right here on our doorstep. In the aftermath, many individuals and groups have shared with me in clinical and community encounters their own emotional reactions to this horrific event. For those with pre-existing trauma in their lives—including experiences of childhood abuse or neglect, or more recent experiences of the death of a loved one, a divorce, or some other destabilizing life event—this terrorist assault was even more difficult to accept. It highlighted a sense of prevailing danger and vulnerability to harm in daily living. For others with anxiety and depressive disorders, this event exacerbated their symptoms and made it all the more difficult to find peace in their lives. And for those with substance use disorders, cravings and relapse became more prevalent, as many looked for the familiar—if toxic—sources of comfort and detachment in these troublesome times. For those fortunate enough to be unscathed by such distress prior to that horrendous day, their innocence was shattered, and their world suddenly became a dangerous and unpredictable place.

Against this backdrop of fears, doubts, and anxieties, the completion of the present text took on even more significance for me. While the lifetraps described in this book are mostly developed in response to individual problematic experiences with parents, siblings, spouses and peers, they are made even more pervasive when responding to collective events such as those of September 11, which have created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, fertile ground for the enhancement of lifetrap beliefs.

My clinical experience in applying Jeffrey Young's Schema Therapy to treat patients who are struggling with a variety of fears and anxieties—including concerns about being aban-

doned or rejected, or unsuccessful attempts to take care of themselves on their own, or with difficulties in recognizing their own needs and wishes—has underscored the value of this therapeutic approach. Through changing problematic ways of thinking about themselves, initiating new behaviors to put the more positive thoughts into practice, permitting the expression of the negative feelings that are often ignored or avoided, and by creating a therapy relationship that fosters the development and practice of a new way of relating interpersonally, Schema Therapy represents a significant advance to existing modes of psychotherapy.

At the same time, I have become increasingly aware of the rich tradition of prayer and spiritual practice that can supplement this therapeutic approach for people of faith. In the course of therapy, when someone is struggling to believe that anyone cares for them or recognizes their needs, my being able to point out that there is a God whose love is everlasting and ever available to us, and that access to God will foster faith and courage have been invaluable tools in confronting fear-based lifetraps.

In many conferences and workshops for clergy and laity alike, I have articulated some of the ways that integrating spirituality into clinical practice can better address key fears in life. It seems to me that lifetrap theory and practice is particularly suited for this kind of integration, as the perspective of lifetraps is fear and the goal of spirituality is freedom.

This book has afforded me the opportunity to systematically address this integration in what I call a psycho-spiritual approach. It will not be appropriate for all people seeking recovery from lifetraps, but for those who are open to a religious or spiritual influence in their lives, I believe that it will open additional avenues for healing and growth. I hope that reading this text will assist you in your search for truth and wholeness.

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Lifetraps—from the Beginning

How Did You Ever Become Who You Are Today?

HAVE you ever found yourself walking down a busy street or simply stopping to rest somewhere and looking out at the range of people passing by, some laughing, others engaged in serious conversation, some well-groomed, others barely clothed, some heading home, others homeless? And have you ever wondered what is driving each of these people to behave as they are, and what events or circumstances in life may account for where they are today? Then, perhaps you turn your attention to your own life, and you wonder how you ended up in the career, marriage or other significant relationships that have become so much a part of your life. Are you happy with your choices? Are they the right ones still?

For me, perhaps the most compelling motivation to pursue a vocation to the priesthood and a career as a clinical psychologist has been my enduring interest in figuring out what influences the choices that people make through the ordinary and exceptional events of life.

Each of us has a unique story to account for our decisions and present life circumstances. For most of us, our recollection of the story begins with memories of childhood, parents and siblings, and significant friends along the way. But our stories truly begin, of course, before we can even remember or put into words the context and quality of these interactions in our lives.

Being male or female starts us off in different directions with a unique set of interests and interactions with the world. Whether we were little or big, chubby or petite probably made a difference in how our parents responded to us, particularly around issues of feeding. Our temperament also contributes to our personal story in a significant way. Some of us are shy by nature, wary of interpersonal interactions, and others learned to treat us accordingly, sometimes by ignoring us. Others are more socially adept, gregarious, playful, and the world responds in kind, with more physical affection and attention. Intelligence, too, plays a key role in our developing selves. Our level of curiosity, language skills, and capacity to engage others in responding to our questions all largely determine the quality of our childhood experience.

As our gender, temperament, and intelligence are biologically determined, they are indelible and usually unchangeable aspects of our story that we must simply accept as the givens of our lives. There are, however, other parts to our story that are environmentally driven—influenced by our parents, siblings, and peers—and these aspects of our life experience, although just as influential as those biological factors, are indeed more amenable to change.

Consider, for example, the influence of those earliest teachers in your lives, your parents. Do you recall a loving, affectionate father who was empathic, caring, and available for soothing when you were hurt or disappointed, or do you instead recall a more emotionally distant, dispassionate father who was unavailable for guidance, support, and protection? When you think of your mother, do you recollect images of a woman who supported your independence and curiosity, or one who taught you to fear the world and to cling to her and her wishes for you? Similarly, when you remember your broth-

ers and sisters, do you recall support, love, and healthy competition, or instead are your memories more tinted with jealousy, rejection, and unrelentingly hurtful comparisons? These early childhood family experiences with parents and siblings play a significant role in subsequent life directions.

Early environmental influences on our lives are not restricted, of course, to our parents and siblings. Teachers, mentors, counselors, and extended family and friends can function as invaluable resources to assist us in coping with the painful emotions resulting from troublesome interactions with parents and siblings. In many cases, their influence may have contributed to a healthier life direction than one that would have otherwise been chosen by an emotionally troubled or confused young person.

For example, if your parents set a standard of perfection for you, where nothing less than a perfect performance at school was acceptable, then when the inevitable below average grade entered your world, and you were feeling like an absolutely worthless person, a sensitive teacher or counselor in whom you had some degree of trust or confidence might have been able to help you. Their acceptance of your limitations might have supported a more resilient sense of self-esteem, even in the face of disappointment or failure. Conversely, if your parents were more neglectful or disinterested in your academic, creative, or athletic performance, an involved teacher or coach might have contributed significantly to your sense of self-worth and increased your interest in these activities. Psychological research has demonstrated again and again the powerful influence of teacher expectations on school performance. When students believe that their teacher has expectations for their success, they are more likely to live up to those standards, and sadly the converse is also true.

While parents are largely responsible for your values and beliefs, peer interactions are probably more responsible for the degree of your sense of interpersonal comfort—your sense of fitting in with others. Were you popular with your classmates and neighboring children, or were you ignored, or worse ridiculed and excluded from games? Depending upon your experiences with peers, you may find yourself even today reaching out to friends for play or comfort, or else avoiding others out of fear or disinterest.

In a very real sense, you have become who you are as a result of all of these factors, biological and environmental. They account for whether you feel secure in relationships with your spouse, partners, and friends, or if you are more cautious and suspicious about the enduring nature of these relationships. They likewise influence your sense of responsibility and freedom to make your own choices, and the degree to which you seek perfection in your life. As such, they continue to influence your inner sense of peace and tranquility, as well as your sense of satisfaction with, and commitment to, personal and professional relationships.

Lifetraps—Getting in the Way of Your Peace and Fulfillment

While most of us may readily acknowledge that these childhood influences play some role in our present sense of peace and fulfillment today, it is not easy to sort through the diverse and sometimes conflicting psychological theories to determine the extent of their ongoing influence. Some theories emphasize the role of biology and temperament above everything, suggesting that parenting has been exaggerated as an influential